



Backbench Business

Representations: Backbench Business

Tuesday 14 March 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 March 2017.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Ian Mearns (Chair); Bob Blackman; Kevin Foster; Mr David Nuttall; Jess Phillips.

Questions 1-19

Witnesses

I: Marion Fellows and Owen Thompson

II: Helen Goodman

III: Alec Shelbrooke, Mr George Howarth and Norman Lamb

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Marion Fellows and Owen Thompson made representations.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Backbench Business Committee. Before us this afternoon, we have three applications for debates. The first one is from Marion Fellows and it is on the Child Maintenance Service.

Marion Fellows: First, let me introduce my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), and give apologies on behalf of the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), who—cross-party—were coming to support this application. Unfortunately, they are all in the main Chamber or in Committee or have previous appointments, so I am afraid you will have to put up with me.

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order and we will try to get you a slot as soon as we possibly can.

Marion Fellows: Thank you all very much.

Helen Goodman made representations.

Q4 **Chair:** Next up is Helen Goodman. Good afternoon, Helen, and welcome. The title of your application is "Future of local and regional news provision".

Helen Goodman: Obviously, this is a matter of great significance for the quality of our democracy, because local and regional news organisations hold us to account for what we do locally; they hold local authorities to account, they report on the courts and the local NHS bodies, and they are extremely highly valued by the public. Local newspapers, websites and apps are read by 40 million people each week.

We want to have this debate because the financial sustainability of local news organisations is under pressure. According to the *Press Gazette*, 200 local newspapers have folded since 2005, and three quarters of local newspaper titles are owned by just four organisations, so there is a lot of media concentration in this market. We have known that this is a problem for some time. It is an ongoing problem, so some licence fee money from the BBC is being put into what are called democracy reporters, for example. None the less, the trend is going in the wrong direction.

This matter is of great interest and significance to Members. We have not debated it in this Parliament. We did debate it at the beginning of the 2010 Parliament, and lots of people took part. I have the support of 16 Members—Labour Members, Tory Members, SNP Members and Plaid Members—including the former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, John Whittingdale. I do not think his name was on the list when we originally put in the application. I would very much like it if we could do this before Easter, because there is a whole week of campaigning on this issue between 24 March and 1 April.

Q5 **Kevin Foster:** As someone who now has only a weekly newspaper and that is it, and no free paper, I sympathise with your request for a debate. I notice that the application is for 90 minutes. I was just thinking that you have technological changes in the industry, potential changes to libel law and, in broadcasting, the question of whether some of the restrictions in terms of ownership at local level are as relevant today as they were when they were put in place. Do you think 90 minutes will actually be enough to cover this subject?

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Helen Goodman: Well, if the Committee wants to offer us three hours in the main Chamber, I shall be absolutely delighted. I was trying to pitch it in such a way that you would find it easier to accept the bid.

Q6 **Kevin Foster:** To be clear, you would accept Westminster Hall as well.

Helen Goodman: Yes—we are happy with either.

Q7 **Kevin Foster:** It is “has considered” rather than a specific motion?

Helen Goodman: Absolutely. People take different views as to how we should tackle this problem.

Kevin Foster: I accept that we might all have different views on the three things I just listed.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** I remember the debate we had at the start of the last Parliament, which was heavily over-subscribed and very popular, so I suspect that, as Kevin said, 90 minutes will be insufficient. The three Front-Bench speakers plus you or whoever leads off would consume at least half the time available, leaving 45 minutes for 15 people to speak—three minutes each, assuming that there is no one else. They would just about get to mention their local newspaper, local TV station and local radio station, and that would be it—they would not get any further. I think there is a case for it.

What do you actually want to see happen as a result? Is there a need for Government action in some shape or form?

Helen Goodman: There may be. Two things spring to mind, apart from the intervention of the BBC and checking out whether the BBC scheme is working properly. First, there is a proposal to deem local titles as community assets under the Localism Act 2011. If we were to go down that path in policy terms, it would mean that big chains could not just close local newspapers without the agreement of local communities. It would give the local community an opportunity to bid. That is one possibility.

There are also some competition issues. In one famous instance, a newspaper called the *Kent Messenger* folded because a takeover of one newspaper by another could not take place. That was due not to what the market was for the newspaper but to the level of dominance that a takeover would give it in the local advertising market. There are lots of these tweaks and things that we could be looking at to help this.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Is DCMS the answering Department?

Helen Goodman: Yes.

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Q10 **Bob Blackman:** Not DCLG, which would deal with the Localism Act?

Helen Goodman: I think Culture, Media and Sport would be more appropriate.

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Q11 **Chair:** Given the timeframe you outlined in your application, may I ask you a hypothetical question? We understand that we will have a slot on Thursday 30 March for three hours in Westminster Hall. If you were offered that, could you accept it?

Helen Goodman: That would be excellent.

Chair: It is hypothetical, of course.

Helen Goodman: Of course.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

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Alec Shelbrooke, Mr George Howarth and Norman Lamb made representations.

Q12 **Chair:** Last, but not least, we have Alec Shelbrooke. Good afternoon, and welcome. Your application is for a debate on German compensation for UK thalidomide victims. I must declare an interest inasmuch as I have had dealings with thalidomide campaigners recently, although I am not part of the debate application.

Alec Shelbrooke: Thank you, Chair. I am not surprised that you have had dealings, because most MPs will have had dealings. That is why we are asking for a three-hour debate. Even though we have not got 15 names at the moment, we know that there will be a heavy campaign to fill the debate. Let me describe why we want it.

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There is an issue of interference of a criminal trial against Grünenthal, the manufacturers of thalidomide, by the German Government. There is solid evidence to uphold those claims, which have been looked at by an international law firm. This subject has been debated in the European Parliament and resolutions have been passed on it. We think that it needs to be debated in the British Parliament. The resolution passed in the European Parliament was for the German Government to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions in the 1960s.

In 2016, Minister David Lidington made three requests to the German Government. He said that there should be a meeting between thalidomiders and the German Government; given that British thalidomiders have the legal right to join German trusts, that should be done in a way that is not bureaucratically insurmountable, while the Thalidomide Trust has informed the British Government that it is; and there should be a Foreign Office observer at the meeting. There has been no progress on those points whatever. The German Government have



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prevaricated and have not answered any of the questions raised over the past three years.

Of 415 MPs in this Parliament, 90 have signed an open letter on the point of the debate, which is to discuss and express their feelings that the British Government must do something. It cannot be a continuing non-responsive situation. The Foreign Office must do more than just keep receiving a no response, because progress has stalled for a long time. We would look to the Minister of State, Sir Alan Duncan, to answer the debate, because he has been having the conversations but is hitting a wall. I am joined by George Howarth and Norman Lamb, so you can see that this is a cross-party application.

Mr Howarth: Alec has said it all, but I will briefly add that every generation has a cause in which a massive injustice has been done, and the 1960s generation of thalidomiders are still in that position. I understand that the last time there was any kind of debate on the general issue was in the previous Parliament, so it would be timely to have one in this Parliament. It seems to me like Hillsborough: you just have to keep going to get justice. I hope that the Committee will support us in that sentiment.

Norman Lamb: It is an incredibly important cause, with an amazing group of campaigners—it is striking that we have all been approached by them. When I was Minister, I had several meetings with the campaigners and at that stage we were trying to put pressure on the German Government. This has gone on for a long time—Alec said three years—and this Parliament needs to be seen to be debating it so that we add to the moral pressure on the German Government.

Q13 **Bob Blackman:** What is it that you want the Government to do? You have asked for a general debate, we understand the subject, and as you have all said, pressure has been continuing on the German Government to do the right thing, but what do you want to achieve from the debate?

Alec Shelbrooke: We need firm commitments from the Minister of State that he will seek actual answers and not accept the non-response. Too many Ministers have gone in, had conversations and come out with, "Well, we're waiting for a response." That cannot go on now. There is an urgent situation here; many people look at a thalidomide victim and notice the obvious—perhaps they haven't got any arms or legs—but most do not notice the physical degradation from using parts of their body that were never designed for the wear and tear that they are now getting. Probably the best example of that is that many are now suffering from collapses of their jawbones and jaw muscles because they have spent 60 years using their mouths to operate pointers. These are ongoing health concerns, and we cannot keep kicking this issue into the long grass.

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Q14 **Bob Blackman:** I agree with you. Obviously it is your application, but you asked for a general debate, as opposed to a motion calling on the Government to do something. Why would you not ask for the Government to do something, as opposed to putting the issues out there again? Everyone around the table would clearly support that. You are not requiring the Government to take any action, as things stand.

Alec Shelbrooke: I put in for a general debate on the Floor of the House because this is about pushing the Minister to go in with the resolution passed in the European Parliament. It will be on a cross-party basis, and we do not want to set things that might not be achieved. We want him to go in there and get a result. That is why it is a general debate, rather than saying to him, "You must achieve X, Y and Z."

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** The other issue which I will just mention is that for a three-hour debate, we would normally expect to see 15 signatures. At the moment, you do not have that number, although I am sure you will not have a problem attracting them.

Alec Shelbrooke: The specific answer to that is that we were looking for a date from the Committee. When we have that date, the campaigners will pressure every single individual MP—

Q16 **Bob Blackman:** Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work that way. We have pressure on time and a queue of debates awaiting time, all of which have speakers lined up. We need to have the speakers lined up so we know that you will be able to run the debate within the time frame that we have allocated to us.

Alec Shelbrooke: I can get those speakers to you. I can feed them to you before you pass judgment on when you would like it to be.

Q17 **Chair:** Okay. It does happen from time to time. The subject matter looks very much like a green light from our perspective, but in order for us to rubber-stamp that, can you—

Alec Shelbrooke: Yes, that is not a problem. I can get you those names.

Q18 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Send them to the Clerk of the Committee, please.

Alec Shelbrooke: Yes.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else?

Helen Goodman: I am very sorry. I went out, and when I was tidying up my papers, I noticed that I had not put an "R" next to my name on my application. I should have done, because I chair the all-party parliamentary group on the NUJ, and the secretariat for that is paid for. That appears in my entry on the register of interests.

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Chair: Okay. Thank you very much for that clarification. That concludes the formal business; thank you for attending.